

## **US Rural Libraries in an Energy-Uncertain World**

Eric Green MLS MA July 2015

Many libraries in the rural United States are currently facing cutbacks and at the same time dealing with increased usage, resulting from uncertain economic times. When citizen patrons are in desperate need of information to deal with dramatic changes in their lives, they turn to libraries for the latest news to deal with these challenges.

One issue related to our economic downturn is Peak Oil. This simply means we have reached the point where we have used 50% of the known oil and that demand is increasing while supply is not. Peak Oil should never be confused with oil depletion. We will have oil for many years to come, but it's going to become much more expensive and scarcer.

So much of the oil we use is based on societal pressures; this is especially true for our personal transportation system in the use of a motor vehicles. What will happen to our personal transportation issues of getting to work, school and the library when this activity becomes too expensive? Many citizens will have less energy to use at home and will turn to their local libraries to use Internet service and other potential costly activities.

Peak Oil hard times, like during the current economic hard times, only mean budgets for libraries will decrease, meaning less staff and services. This will be especially true for rural public and college libraries, which currently struggle with these issues. Library hours might have to be reduced with less staffing and operating funds and the possibility of increased patrons' usage; libraries will be stretched to their limits even more than they currently are.

Other services that could become much more expensive could be interlibrary loans (ILL), which rely on courier services. With fuel costs rising, many libraries may have to limit the amount of ILLs they can receive, and some smaller libraries may cancel these services. Fortunately, with the advancement in online services, ILL's might be delivered in the form of E-books, which patrons can read online within a specified period of time.

Another valuable service for rural public libraries that may become too expensive is that of the bookmobile. With high transposition costs, many alternative energy sources will be needed to run the bookmobiles from electric-solar cell technology, vegetable oil powered engines and even the extreme possibly of horse driven bookmobiles.

Operational cost of lighting and heating libraries could be a challenge as well. For lighting, some of these solutions are solar panel, passive solar windows, sky-lighting, and even lanterns. For heating, fireplaces, geothermal and solar power batteries to run the furnace and air-conditioning are possibilities. Library staff will still use energy to

run library computers, photocopies, and fax machines, but solar technologies and even wind turbines could be used.

Another cost issue for libraries will be maintaining and developing the collection. The cost of printing books will increase and paperback books, which are disposable, are a waste of paper. Hard backs, which cost more, will last longer and may be a better investment. Repairing books will be more of an option and fewer books will be thrown in the trash, even if they can't be sold in book sales.

One possible solution is an increase in volunteerism from patrons. It's possible some of these libraries will return to the practice of existing without librarians and must rely on others in the community to give time to the library. It's also possible that private community subscription libraries will blossom out of someone's house and grow from other private collections. City library systems may need to develop more and smaller community branch libraries to become more accessible to walking and bike paths as well as public transportation.

These new branch libraries, like rural libraries, will play an even more important role as community centers and the heart and soul of communities. Overall, citizens might appreciate their libraries not only as a source of information in turbulent times but also as a way to reconnect to local communities like never before.

"I'd put my money on the sun and solar energy. What a source of power! I hope we don't have to wait until oil and coal run out before we tackle that." **Thomas Edison**, 1931

**Author:**

**Eric R Green is the Coordinator for the *Western Library System* in Scottsbluff. He has a master's degree in Sociology from American University in Washington DC and a master's degree in Library Science from Emporia State, Kansas.**